



Dear Readers:

Welcome to the first themed issue of *Asian Jewish Life* and the one that I think I have always wanted to make the most. I grew up watching slideshows of my father's business trips to India in the 70s and dreamed of India- the color, the contrasts, the extremes, the diversity. I was fascinated by all things connected to India: the food, the clothing, Bollywood, the music and especially the authors.

What I didn't know about then was that there is over 2000 years of Jewish history in India. Despite this long history, Navras Jaat Aafreedi will argue in this issue of *AJL* in his piece *Absence of Jewish Studies in India - Creating a new awareness*, that few Indians are even aware of the Jewish presence and Jewish contribution to India.

Sadia Shepard in her book, *The Girl from Foreign*, and her film, *In Search of the Bene Israel*, sheds light on this history in the feature *Rescuing Shipwrecked Ancestors - A story in three generations*. Shepard's film is a highly personal quest to memorialize the community of her grandmother's childhood. Likewise, we also talk to film maker Jonas Pariente who documents the Bene Israel in his film, *Next Year in Bombay*. Pariente examines the very real conflict between the desire to live in Israel and the factors that influence some members to stay in India.

The photographs of Richard Lord introduce a glimpse at the future of Indian Jewry. The photos are part of a collection contributed to *AJL* by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and are presented as the cover story, *Growing up Jewish in India - a photo essay*.

For the poetry pages, the late Nissim Ezekiel's work needs to be highlighted. Though *Asian Jewish Life* typically does not reprint, certainly this is an exception I was willing to make. He was more than

an Indian Jewish poet. He is India's poet, an integral part of their culture. He is the poet all school children study, adults can still recite and writers aim to be.

The question was who held the rights to his work. In one e-mail to a leader within the Bene Israel community, I was then 'virtually' introduced to Ezekiel's former student and cousin. She then connected me to his niece and nephew. To my surprise, it turns out that his nephew is Nandu Bhende, one of India's great rock stars. The two collaborated and put Ezekiel's words to Bhende's music - a story perhaps little known outside of India. The poetry section includes both a song and a poem.

With poet laureates and rock stars still on my mind, I tell my two degrees of separation story at a party. Upon hearing about *AJL*, there is a consensus among Indian guests that I must look into India's Seinfeld, a Bene Israel comedian named Samson Koletekar. An interview was born!

Undoubtedly, India is a place of spirit and magic. It is a country that calls to people in search of something - adventure, release, enlightenment. As Dr. Adam Cohen explains, for many Israeli backpackers, the road to enlightenment in India ends in drug abuse in, *In Search of Ecstasy-Israelis and drug abuse in India*.

To help redefine the image of a backpacker, the organization Lev Olam has drawn on their energy and directed it towards the positive and the opportunity to help India's neediest. Lev Olam is our *Best of Asian Jewish Life* focus this issue.

Lastly, wandering the streets of Bangalore we find Jessica MacKenzie Murthy, a Jew married to an Indian who explains how a single bite of falafel brings with it the comforts of home.

To tackle 2000 years of history in one issue is impossible. It would take volumes to speak to, so I promise this will not be the last India issue.

Write in and tell us what you think.

Thanks for reading!

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief



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